

An Insight on the Internship Experience of the Indian Hospitality Graduates

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Abstract: Purpose – The primary purpose of the research study conducted was to look into hospitality internships and improve such practices within the distinct environment of the hospitality industry of India by acquiring new knowledge, related to and of value to its primary stakeholders Design/methodology/approach : The unique characteristics of the three groups under investigation necessitated the utilization of different research methods and techniques – an approach known as methodological triangulation. Findings : While the findings reliably measure the India-specific environment, the author argues that the particular strategies produced can effectively be implemented in other countries. Practical implications : By comparing and contrasting the views and expectations of all stakeholders involved, the author recommends specific strategies for improving the quality and enhancing the value of internship practices for hospitality students. Originality/value: The paper is of value to all hospitality stakeholders, since it can serve as a guide for the provision of a pedagogically sound internship experience to students.

Keywords: Hospitality management, Hospitality education, Personality, India.

1 INTRODUCTION

Whether it offsets total immersion, an opportunity to get your feet wet or just dirty your hands, internships afford a taste of reality you could never find on a college campus (K. Nquyen, cited in Thiel and Hartley, 1997, p. 20). The National Society of Experiential Learning (1997) defines an internship as:...any carefully monitored work or service experience in which an individual has intentional learning goals and reflects actively on how he or she is learning throughout the experience (p.2). In general terms, an internship is viewed as a short-term practical work experience in which students receive training and gain experience in a specific field or career area of their interest. For their contributions, students may or may not earn money depending upon the specific situation. The internship experience enables students to apply classroom theory within the actual world of work thus bridging the gap between theory and practice. According to Thiel and Hartley (1997), the University of Cincinnati's Cooperative Education Program developed the first college-endorsed internship program in the USA in 1906. The program was developed based on the premise that college students pursuing a professional program of studies needed to find a way to finance their education. The first framework of managing the practical experience element was adapted in the field of education where a major requirement of the teaching certification is practice.

experience. Today, almost all hospitality programs throughout the world incorporate internship practices in their curriculum, in one form or another. Various studies (Petrillose and Montgomery, 1998; Gabris and Mitchell, 1989; Downey and De Veau, 1987) outline the value and variety of the benefits enjoyed by those students participating in internships, including a better understanding and knowledge of the tasks and practices performed by industry professionals, improved self-confidence, enhanced employment and professional growth opportunities, the ability to network within the industry by creating personal contacts, exposure to management activities, and the development of skills relevant to their particular career choice. Furthermore, internships provide an opportunity for students to apply classroom theories to practical issues in the actual business setting, and most importantly to evaluate whether their career choice is compatible with their interests and personality. Nevertheless, the provision of any experiential learning activity, such as hospitality internship, does not necessarily provide a meaningful learning experience. It is important not to overlook the significant benefits that internships provide both to the hospitality properties that employ student interns and the educational institutions that are involved in such practices. Hospitality establishments, for example, enjoy such benefits as the ability to educate and mentor the next generation of hospitality industry leaders by demonstrating career potential and opportunities, easy access to seasonal and inexpensive labour markets, and the opportunity to employ someone without any long-term employment obligations and legal commitments. Scott (1992) argues that internships provide the organization with a cost-effective vehicle for meeting strategic recruitment, selection, training, and retention goals, while Thiel and Hartley (1997) advocate that practices such as these provide an avenue through which hospitality establishments may enhance their image and thus become socially responsive to the needs of the community. Internship involvement imparts substantial advantages to educational institutions and their faculty members. Leslie (1991) argues that the increased contact and cooperation between educators

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Damonte and Vaden (1987) traced the origins of hospitality experiential learning to E.M. Statler (1863-1928), the father of the American hotel, who emphasized the need for hospitality students to experience the demands of management in the real world via a "hands-on" learning

and the hospitality industry could enrich the industry's input in course development and assist educators to keep abreast of hospitality trends and future developments. Such relationships may provide channels for testing the compatibility and relevance of academic theory with the operational requirements of industry. In addition, improved relationships may be extended with further cooperation to other fields of mutual concern (e.g. college advisory boards, training seminars, mentoring programs, student field trips, job fairs, and industrial visits). Finally, successful internship programs may generate invaluable publicity by reiterating with tangible evidence an institution's commitment and contribution towards the local economy. Hospitality internships have become an integral component of all hospitality programs offered in India since their inception in the late 1980s. Internships are viewed as an opportunity to assist the local hospitality industry during the "high volume season by providing qualified labour, while at the same time enhancing the student learning experiences and career opportunities. Educational institutions are responsible for overseeing student interns by conducting on-site visits to hospitality establishments and through consultations with their on-the-job supervisors. As a major requirement stipulated by the India Ministry of Education and Culture, students are responsible for maintaining an up-to-date logbook, which partially describes the role and contribution made by them during their internship practice. Students are paid a token wage for their services, and in some cases are offered accommodation as part of their compensation package.

2 RESEARCH PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The primary purpose of the research study conducted was to look into hospitality internships and improve such practices within the distinct environment of the hospitality industry of India by acquiring new knowledge, related and of value, to its primary stakeholders. The objective was to assist in the development of a new and innovative approach to hospitality internships, one that would maximize student work placement opportunities, enhance their experiential learning experience, and provide the industry with talented individuals who might make a genuine and valuable contribution to the service delivery process. Principally, such innovative learning experience should provide the future foundation for student career development and strengthen the working relationship between hospitality students, the industry and those educational institutions offering related programs.

The research aimed to provide answers to the following questions:

RQ1. What are the most important problems experienced by hospitality professionals when employing student interns?

RQ2. Which qualities do hospitality professionals wish to observe in a student intern?

RQ3. What are the most severe problems experienced by students during their hospitality

internship practices? Are there any significant differences between international and Indian student interns?

RQ4. Are there any differences between private and government-sponsored students with regard to their internship experience?

In an attempt to reliably measure the issues surrounding internship practices in India, the author developed a unique research activity that reflected the characteristics of each group under investigation. Based on a review of related literature, the author developed three questionnaires that enabled data to be collected from hospitality students, educators, and professionals. The distinctive characteristics of the three groups necessitated the utilization of different research methods and techniques – an approach known as methodological triangulation. Easter by- Smith et al. (1991) define methodological triangulation as the utilization of both quantitative and qualitative data collection in the study of the same phenomenon. The target population of the study included all students pursuing an accredited hospitality degree in a private or government sponsored educational institute in India, and who have completed at least one hospitality internship practice. In order to avoid the danger of under or over-representing some members of the population, a probability-stratified sample was used. The following strata were identified using representative percentages of the actual population, and taking into consideration:

- international students and Indian students;
- class rankings (sophomore, junior, and senior students); and males/females

Official class list and a computerized number generator system were utilized in order to ensure that each member of the population had a known and equal chance of being selected. The student surveys were group-distributed because it was a convenient and low cost technique for administering the questionnaires. The research population for hospitality professionals included the individuals employed in (five-, four-, and three-star) hotels in all the major cities of India. According to figures published by the India Tourism Organization (2005), 150 properties were included in the research population. Due to the small size of the population the researcher opted to include all 150 establishments in the study. One survey questionnaire only was sent by mail to each of the 150 hospitality establishments. The survey questionnaire was personalized and addressed by name, to either the General Manager or the Human Resources Manager of the establishment. A mixed distribution method including both postal and face-to-face distribution was implemented to administer the questionnaire for hospitality professionals. The hospitality educator sample included only those individuals who were responsible for overseeing student internship practices in their respective educational institutions. All participating educators had long-term experience and knowledge of the topics and issues under investigation and their participation and input had a huge impact on the significance and value of the

current research study. Closed questions were developed and included in all three surveys and each respondent was asked to select an answer from a number of predetermined alternatives. A combination of multiple choice questions, rating scale questions, and classification questions were used, to measure the views of the stakeholders. Questions were converted to statements and respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which each statement reflected their opinion using a five-point ordinal Likert scale. All three questionnaires were accompanied by a cover letter, which explained the purpose, value, and objectives of the survey to respondents. The three questionnaires were pilot tested before being administered to study participants in order to assess the validity and reliability of the questions. Descriptive and inferential statistics, including frequencies and t-tests were used to present and analyze the data, and determine if there were significant differences in opinions, perceptions, and attitudes among internship primary stakeholders.

4 ANALYSIS OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

There search study revealed that hospitality internship practices in India are facing a myriad of challenges. The primary deficit that hinders the overall quality of the practice is a lack of commitment by all them as stakeholders involved. There search activity revealed that existing internship practices lack sufficient clarity and purpose, appropriate academic assessment and industry recognition, and effective integration with the rest of the hospitality curriculum. Educational institutions seem to focus their efforts in "finding a place" for their student interns, whilst overlooking other issues such as the organization, planning, and implementation of the experience. Hospitality professionals are failing to provide interns with meaningful work. They do not assign them to a qualified on-the-job supervisor, and do not provide them with a positive organizational environment in which they might develop both personally and professionally. In addition, the current practices, most of which reflect the limitations of the established governmental policies, seem to widen the gap between students' career expectations as developed in the classroom setting, and the reality of employment in the actual hospitality environment. Overall, hospitality internship practices in India fail to present the learning opportunities anticipated by students from an experience of this nature. The research activity revealed that while almost all local educational institutions instil quality assurance procedures into their course curriculum delivery, internship practices receive no such treatment. Inconsistencies in a variety of operating issues include discriminatory approaches against international students, preferential treatment of government-sponsored students, and exclusions from governmental subsidies. The above are just some of the facts that confirm the lack of any internship-specific quality assurance mechanisms. Consequently, the absence of any internship-specific quality standards causes a discrepancy between the practical and theoretical components of the student hospitality

curriculum, which may intensify the perception of a gap between classroom theory and internship practices. In several internship-specific variables, such as the arrangement of the intern's placement, monetary rewards, internship reporting requirements, legal administration and intern's rotation, the study revealed significant differences between the three stakeholder groups. In contrast, no significant differences were noted in variables such as the desired length plus the academic prerequisites of internships, the frequency of faculty on-site visits, the issue of unpaid versus paid internship practices, the need for interdepartmental and interdivisional rotation, the necessity for immediate restructuring of the policy pertaining to international student interns, and the role of the internship coordinator. Table I presents the primary differences between the three stakeholder groups on five internship-related variables. Table I: Differences between the primary stakeholders This study, the first of its nature conducted in India, emphasizes the major discontent of all stakeholders towards the established policy, and reiterates the need for an immediate and drastic change. The participatory hospitality educators, professionals, and students agree that such a modification should enhance the educational experience of each student as well as develop a mutually beneficial relationship for everyone. Hospitality professionals: internship problems and student "qualities" Consistent with student findings, the most important problem that hospitality professionals experience when dealing with hospitality internships are the requirements imposed by the India Government. These requirements appertain mostly to international students and the arduous procedure that must be followed to secure employment permits. In order to restrict illegal employment of foreign workers, the government believes that such an elaborate procedure is essential. But even so, hospitality professionals seem reluctant and often unwilling to follow the procedures in place due to their complicated nature. The second most important problem indicated was that of identifying qualified interns, followed by detecting true student professionalism. The findings confirmed the impressions of many as to the challenge of exposing qualified interns during the recruiting program of colleges and the nature of the overall professional attitude of students. The findings on internship-specific problems that are associated with the opinions of hospitality professionals are presented in Table II. Table II: The opinions of hospitality professionals (n=77) on internship specific problems For years, many Indian hospitality experts, especially educators, have been claiming that interventions by hospitality employee labour unions pose serious challenges and obstacles to student internships on a variety of fronts such as the availability of positions, selection of shifts, and monetary rewards. The present research rejects this notion since it is evident that hospitality professionals have classified labour union interventions to be the least problematic area in the 20 problem statements listed. Responding to the question "Which of the following qualities and skills must a hospitality student possess in order to be a successful intern?", the respondents ranked respectively, positive attitude, communication skills, human skills, self-

discipline, and hospitality technical skills as the five top competencies. Respondents indicated that the good academic performance of students, represented by their grade point average (GPA), is not a characteristic of a competent intern. In many cases, students with high academic achievements fail to adjust to the volatile hospitality environment due to the unrealistic level of their expectations. In contrast, others with average or below average academic performance and lower expectations enjoy a prosperous and lasting hospitality career. In addition, the respondents indicated that computer proficiency is not an important competency that hospitality students must possess in order to be either successful interns or future hospitality employees. Professionals, apparently, believe that computer proficiency is unimportant since the nature and level of intern assignments do not merit such competencies. Table III exhibits the opinions of hospitality professionals with regard to the skills and competencies students must possess in order to become quality interns. Table III: Characteristics of quality hospitality interns

Statistical differences between Indian and international students

Research findings revealed that hospitality students are not all the same. For the first time the long-standing assumption, supporting the existence of significant differences between Indian and international students, was substantiated. It is more obvious than ever that we must view, and thus treat, the two groups differently during internship practices. In particular, three major differences between local and international student interns were exposed by the research findings. The most significant difference between the two groups highlights the problems created by government regulations, followed by the search for a suitable internship placement position, and the housing and accommodation problems faced by students. One interesting contrast shows that international students rank governmental requirements as their greatest obstacle, whilst local students rank it as sixth. This outcome was expected since most of the governmental requirements, especially those administrative areas dispensing the issuance of work permits, affect international students only. There is a conspicuous view held by hospitality students that the established governmental policy is an impediment to their overall hospitality experience. Table IV present statistical analysis of the internship related problems and outlines the differences between Indian and international students. Table IV: Internship related problems: descriptive statistics and independent sample t-test

One of the most unexpected discoveries of this research study was the fact that no significant statistical difference was found to exist between international and local students with regard to the communication problems variable. Despite language differences, both international and local students reported that language was the least important problem encountered during their experience. This finding emerges indirect contrast with the overall assumption, shared by many hospitality experts in India, which suggest that the communication and language deficiencies of interns, especially of

international students, impose additional burdens on the internship practice.

Statistical differences between private and government sponsored students

Although a direct comparison between hospitality students pursuing hospitality degrees in private educational institutions and those at the government-sponsored institution initially was not a primary objective of the study, it was decided to conduct a number of comparative statistics in order to discover if the student experience differs in any way. The goal was to establish whether the subsidy, provided by the government to hoteliers employing public sector student interns, enhances their overall internship experience. Surprisingly, the findings suggest that no significant difference in internship related issues exists between the two groups of students other than on issues directly relevant to international students. It is apparent that the government subsidy acts only as a financial incentive to hoteliers who expedite and simplify the recruitment of government-sponsored students, but it fails to enhance the overall value of their learning experience.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INTERNSHIP STAKEHOLDERS

Although the study reliably measured the India-specific environment, it can be argued that the particular strategies developed and presented below can be implemented effectively in other countries. The following outline summarizes the primary recommendations produced by the research activity: All stakeholders agree that there is an urgent need for modernizing internship practices in India. Issues such as the internship's management, purpose, stakeholders' role and duties, and students' expectations must be revisited in an attempt to seek new innovative ways to promote a pedagogically sound experience, beneficial to all stakeholders involved. Hospitality educators and professionals should embrace a new innovative approach when dealing with internship practices. They should recognize the students' internship-specific needs such as clarification of the internship's purpose and the intern's role, the need for feedback, assessment, and autonomy to make decisions that could shape a student's future personal and professional development. The cornerstone of this novel way of thinking is the provision of a substantial, meaningful, and career relevant placement of interns. Hospitality students demand to be given a substantial, meaningful, and career-related job assignment, not just mindless drudgery unrepresentative of the values and vision of the industry. They expect to participate in a learning experience that is genuine, meaningful and relevant to their academic studies, that will help them develop both personally and professionally, and increase their future career employability opportunities. A good internship experience should involve the individual student as much as possible in the planning process because true learning is personalised and can exist only when the individual learner is actually interested in the learning topic, process, and purpose. It is crucial that students take ownership of their internship

practices by setting their own personal goals and objectives and fully committing themselves to the practice. While balance between theory and practice is essential to all students, the quality of both will be the determining factor in their professional development. Educational institutions should develop their own framework of good practice for managing their students' internship practices. Such a framework should reflect the institution's goals and objectives as well as the uniqueness of the local hospitality environment and the advancements of modern hospitality education. The research activity revealed that existing internship practices give interns little incentive to reflect, formally or informally, upon their experience, integrate the newly acquired experience with hospitality theories and practices, and actively apply hospitality theories and concepts in further learning experiences. A pedagogically sound framework must provide students the opportunity to reflect back on their internships in an attempt to relate it to their "classroom" experience. Educational institutions could utilize a number of techniques, such as formal pre- and post-internship seminars and reflective papers, in order to encourage their student interns' self-reflection. Educational institutions must promote experiential learning as an inseparable part of their hospitality curriculum while nurturing realistic expectations in their students. Hospitality educators should attempt to nourish realistic expectations, regarding the internship's demands and rewards. Such a pragmatic representation can genuinely project a realistic perspective of the industry's conditions and provide a reality check for all individuals wishing to pursue a hospitality career. Educators should strive to reinforce such representation with testimonies of students with prior internship experience. In addition, educational institutions offering hospitality programs in India should commit themselves to internships by allocating resources essential for effectively managing their students' learning experience. Hospitality educators must ensure that internships adequately prepare students to enter the hospitality industry upon their graduation by complementing their theoretical knowledge with the actual practice. The hospitality curriculum should be revised in order to interconnect with students' internship practices. Such a connection could minimize the perceived gap between hospitality education (theory), and the hospitality industry (practice). Moreover, educational institutions offering hospitality related programs must re-examine their admission requirements since hospitality professionals indicate that finding qualified interns is one of the primary problems they experience in dealing with internship practices. A pre-registration orientation program might enlighten prospective students as to the particulars of pursuing a hospitality profession, thus forming realistic expectations for both their academic and industrial experience. While most of the hospitality professionals, who participated in the research study, recognize the value and importance of the "right" internship experience, they find difficulty at the same time in committing to such a practice. They argue that it is extremely difficult to find time and financial resources to support internships since

hospitality operational imperatives most often override longer-term considerations, especially in such a highly volatile industry. Internships will only succeed if hospitality professionals are willing to give meaningful work to interns, to assign them to a qualified supervisor, and to provide them with a positive organizational environment in which they may develop themselves. Employers, acting as intern host organizations should be willing and able to provide all the developmental opportunities necessary to meet their internship objectives, and concerning the nature of internship placements offered to hospitality students, they should become more innovative. All stakeholders involved should strive to transform the existing "warm body" perception that a number of professionals embrace, especially towards international students, thus elevating a mutually beneficial relationship to serve, foremost, the long-term interests of the industry. Student interns must fully commit themselves to the internship practice while at the same time demonstrating a responsible attitude and a demeanour of professionalism equal to that of hospitality professionals. The participation of interns in the practice must be governed by intrinsic factors such as their personal interest, the broadening of their horizons, their ambition for a prosperous career and, especially, their desire to learn and experience new things. Ultimately, the quality of the experience depends upon the learner's ability and willingness to learn. Extrinsic motives must also be present since they reinforce the desire of interns to perform during the experiential learning activity. Research findings have established the crucial role undertaken by intern on-the-job supervisors to the success of the internship experience. In addition, the study confirmed the absence of any formal training for individuals who act as intern on-the-job supervisors, in terms of how to manage student interns. The host organization must assign qualified managerial level employees, with the appropriate training experience, to act as the intern supervisors and provide them with the appropriate time and resources for managing a student internship experience. Furthermore, many participants embraced the idea of educating intern on-the-job supervisors through specific pre-internship seminars. Going even further, some suggested that the Human Resources Development Authority of India, should subsidize such "train the trainer" seminars. It is imperative that all stakeholders involved distinguish the difference between student internships, regular internship practices, and management trainee programs. To avoid any confusion, I would like to suggest that a distinction be made between student and non-student internship practices by renaming the former "studentships". India's accession to the European Union will provide local hospitality students the opportunity to experience overseas internships. According to Toncar and Cudmore (2000), such internship practices provide "an important international work experience, substantial cultural and travel activities and opportunities, and the on-site supervision to ensure that students will have a successful and positive experience" (p.62). By being exposed to different cultures, hospitality students will have a better understanding of their international guests' needs. Such activities can be organized under the

supervision and guidance of India's educational programs. Opportunities for overseas internships should be available to the Indian hospitality students, who will be given the option of either a local or an international internship experience. Special requirements should be developed for students who wish to experience an overseas internship. By investigating the triangular relationship of the primary internship stakeholders, the current research provides valuable insights into important aspects of the experience while at the same time identifying which related areas need further attention. In particular, the paper identifies how hospitality students and professionals view internship specific problems; how different groups of students view such problems, and what those characteristics are that define a "quality" intern. The research findings also indicate the need for further scientific investigation into the efficacy of hospitality internship programs. Hospitality scholars should explore the differences between students who have participated in internship practices versus those who have not, in terms of their career development and progression. Internship practices will continue to play a significant role in hospitality degree programs. Educational institutions throughout the world must strive to develop a unique triangular partnership between hospitality students, the industry and educational institutions, forming a relationship based on intrinsic motivators and the common interests of the industry. The aim should be for an innovative hospitality management experience that would best fit the personality traits of individuals and, as a result, committing them to the values governing the modern hospitality industry. The challenge for all stakeholders is to further commit to the practice and embrace new and innovative approaches that can greatly improve the development of the next generation of hospitality professionals; a generation that will depend more on human relations and skills rather than impersonal financial considerations.

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Table I: Differences between the primary stakeholders

<i>Internship-related variable</i>	<i>Students (n¼166)</i>	<i>Professionals (n¼77)</i>	<i>Educators (n¼10)</i>
<i>Intern's placement</i>	<i>Cooperation between the educational institution and the industry</i>	<i>Cooperation between students, educators, and the industry</i>	<i>Cooperation between students, educators, and the industry</i>
<i>Monetary rewards</i>	<i>Rs4510-5500^a</i>	<i>Rs 35100-45000</i>	<i>Rs35100-45000</i>
<i>Interns reporting requirements</i>	<i>Logbook</i>	<i>Logbook and/or special project with oral presentation</i>	<i>Oral presentation and a self-reflective paper</i>
<i>Legal administration</i>	<i>Contract between the student, the educational institution and the employer, specifying terms and conditions of employment</i>	<i>Contract between the student, the educational institution and the employer, specifying terms and conditions of employment</i>	<i>Half argue that contracts should be signed only between students and employers</i>

<i>Rotation</i>	<i>Rooms Division, F&B Division, Marketing & Sales Division</i>	<i>Rooms Division, F&B Division</i>	<i>All hotel divisions</i>
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